

Learning about local wildlife is

an important part of living here

Msln. 6-6-08

My column about learning how to shoot (Missoulian, May 23) generated some disturbance I had not anticipated.

Ever since I can remember, my greatest source of entertainment has been to laugh at my own behavior. My intention was entirely benign in relating the story that, while learning to shoot at targets, instead of concentrating on them, all I could focus on was my instructor's jacket.

To those who write in defense of the bear I affectionately referred to as "Mrs. Yogi" in the story, thank you for reminding all of us what I supposed before I moved here – that bear spray is preferable to a bullet any time you can exercise that option.

A gun is not a toy and shooting is not a video game. I met people, when I first arrived in Montana, who think that only a gun can stop a bear, but since then, I have realized one cannot judge the situation unless and until one is face to face with the animal. In that case, I would always reach for my holster – the one that

holds the bear repellent. If you knew me, you'd know there will be no shooting – except of clays, and even then, my success rate is slim enough to give me pause.

What have I learned? Since I am about to become an official resident of the Ninemile Valley in Huson, and as a natural outgrowth of my husband's avid interest in wildlife and the photography of it, I've joined the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup. Organized in 2005 under the auspices of the Boone and Crockett Club, the original group mapped local wildlife movement areas. Since then, the group has shared concerns about loss of wildlife with local landowners in hopes that this nature-rich valley can maintain its rural atmosphere

At first, I thought I would simply



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attend lectures and nature outings so that I might glean valuable information about the abundance of animal life in the area. Before I knew it, I was hooked. I've purchased bear-proof trash containers, learned extensively about the different types and effectiveness of bear repellent – and even discovered that what I would have considered an innocent bird feeder can cause an even more innocent bear to get himself into trouble by scaling a tree to get to the food. That bear then acquires that taste on his palette.

We humans often fail to see the forest for the trees – to recognize the shortsightedness in our attempt to draw fascinating wildlife to our own properties. In an effort to make life more interesting for our own view, we neglect to consider the consequences of our selfish actions – a fed bear is a dead bear. By enticing them into bad behavior as if they were zoo creatures to be admired from inside our homes, we encourage them to participate in destructive behavior. Shame on us.

I have become a board member of this worthy nonprofit organization that strives to realize peaceful coexistence between wildlife and human life – whether potential conflict occurs while crossing Interstate 90 corridors or while transversing our own backyards. The local and volunteer membership of NWW attempts to maintain wildlife movement areas so that populations may move about freely.

This is, unfortunately, sometimes interrupted by landowners who lure elk herds to feed on their own property, hence disturbing the natural movement necessary to the well-being of the species. People who may not know better and have lived here for years may still not be aware of the high price they pay for short-term entertainment while in the long run, the future of abundant wildlife may be at stake.

The NWW has ensured that road signs warn drivers at high-traffic wildlife crossings – their goal is to

reduce roadkill and increase driver safety. They work with several agencies to obtain grants and currently utilize motion-sensitive cameras to observe wildlife challenges. One member has enlisted enthusiastic school bus children in an observation project: they maintain a "wildlife sighting" log while traveling to and from school that can be used for research. Even the bus drivers have become involved.

I have learned much more than I had bargained for. Lectures on wolf delisting, black bear versus grizzly bear behavioral habits and how to properly manage each and recently a bird's-eye view of raptors, offered this newcomer the golden opportunity to become better acquainted with my new Ninemile friends and neighbors – and I don't mean just the human ones.

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